

The UKZN Griot Of Responses and Respondents



This is my last column of the year, so like the international TV news services, an endless replay of the year's coverage would seem to offer a sensible closure.

WORDS: KEYAN TOMASELLI

My column has been greatly appreciated by many at UKZN. I know this because some write me long philosophical responses debating issues I have raised. Others collar me in the corridors and at parties, and furtively congratulate my courage, usually tinged with dire warnings about my job security. Well, I still have my job, though I am now getting other offers also. Some I have refused. Corporate Relations has since had many offers by budding columnists that they did refuse. Hey man, writing a column takes experience and training. Thinking about what to write becomes an abiding obsession as deadlines and my editor loom. This is a tough job. Keeping one's readers is even tougher. I'm not a media professor for nothing. And, now columnists are one of the targets of the proposed media tribunal also.

UKZN refugees and readers elsewhere are less furtive in their responses. One, responding to my comments on the Byzantine UKZN leave system, wrote:

"Here (University X) we have pink, green and orange leave forms (so we are still in a paper world – after reading your column, perhaps this is a blessing in disguise) – each for a different type of leave. There doesn't seem to be a specific limit on Special Leave, if properly motivated. On the other hand, a difficulty arises when one wants to work in one's home office rather than on campus. When I'm writing I do it better in my own space. But there is no "form" for that – in both senses of the word, unfortunately. Very much a 9 to 5 (in fact, 8 to 4) Mon to Fri culture. Maybe this is even worse in my department because it is influenced by Science Faculty culture. I try to write on Sundays, but it's not really enough time."

At a recent meeting at a Free State university an international science and humanities panel was evicted from the admin block because the entrance was locked at 4.30pm. So we all retired to the pub to discuss the future and liquidity of the Humanities.

Remember that film and TV series, *9 to 5*, where a bunch of gorgeous secretaries never seem to do any work, gossiping all day? When I first arrived at Natal University in 1985 secretaries would take two

hour tea breaks. At Wits where I started my academic career, Fridays were trading days as cut price pre-packed groceries substituted for spaza shops. Every Wits department had its grocery hawker, usually of senior rank. Everybody was shopping for a good deal and little work got done.

Corporatisation and spreadsheet management changed all that. Some departments however still have time to take tea once or twice a day, keeping up the appearance of academic collegiality. If every tea room was turned into an office or seminar room the space problem would disappear. Each building should then be allocated a single, welcoming, collegiate, shared and serviced space, for all. At the moment the tea rooms are protected by disciplines as was East Germany by the Berlin Wall.

The mess at the HC front gate continues unabated, as does the excessive noise – screamers seem to predominate at the MTB coffee shop (during term). The PMB folks have similar problems what with rallies on the grass but otherwise life there seems to be more tranquil, certainly of a 9-5 nature. A dean once got locked into the Admin block there when working late. At HC, I often arrive at 6am to try to get some work done before staff, students and e-mails interrupt my productivity. I am never the first to arrive, there are always a few students trickling their way onto campus from the drop-off zone before sunrise. Edgewood remains marooned amid an industrial area and Westville continues to squat on a ridge surrounded by an empty moat once used as a barrier by the military.

Corporate Relations continues to improve. Not only did I get a birthday card from my alma mater, Wits, but from the UKZN Vice-Chancellor also, personally signed. The new director of Corporate Relations has revealed herself in a photograph only once in *UKZNDABA*, unlike the multiple appearances of her predecessor. PR is now about the institution, not personalities.

To wrap up, let me revisit what is meant by *griot* with due acknowledgement to Wikipedia. A **griot** (English pronunciation: /'gri.ɔs/, French pronunciation: [gʁi.o], with a silent t) or **jeli** (*djeli* or *djéli* in French spelling)

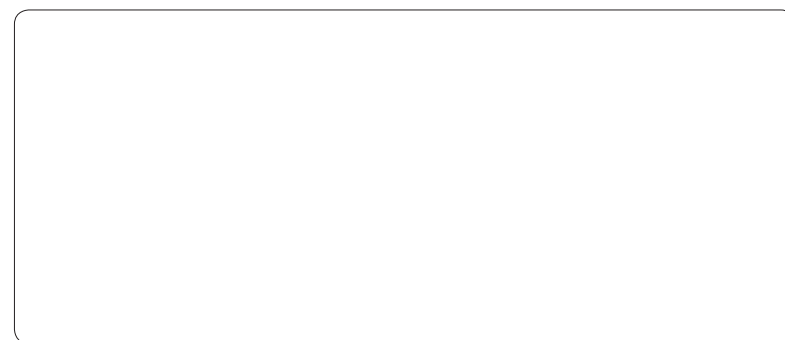
is a West African poet, praise singer, and wandering musician, considered a repository of oral tradition. As such, they are sometimes also called bards, and here in KZN *imbongis*. According to Paul Oliver in his book *Savannah Syncopators*, "Though [the *griot*] has to know many traditional songs without error, he must also have the ability to extemporize on current events, chance incidents and the passing scene. His wit can be devastating and his knowledge

of local history formidable." That's me! Although griots are popularly known as 'praise singers', griots may also use their vocal expertise for gossip, satire, or political comment. By calling myself a *griot* (to which no-one has objected) I give myself the necessary license to write what I write.

Keyan G Tomaselli is Director of the Centre for Communication, Media and Society. He has been known to perform on occasion in public and to gossip with theoretical intent.

Sudoku

		6		1		5	8	
					5	7		2
2		5	8	7		1	6	9
			5			4	2	
				3	8			
	5	3	4			9	1	8
		4		5	6	8	9	
			7		3		4	1
7	2	8			1	3	5	



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Nomonde Mbadi – Executive Director; Smita Maharaj – Director: Communications; Deanne Collins – Publications Manager; Neesha Maharaj – Journalist; Lunga Memela – Journalist; Sithembile Shabangu – Journalist; Vidhya Singh – Layout & Design.

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